

THREE POEMS FROM *HOMECOMING*

By Julia Alvarez

Let's make a modern primer for our kids:
A is for Auschwitz; B is for Biafra;
Chile; Dachau; El Salvador; F is
the Falklands; Grenada; Hiroshima;
stands for H; Northern Ireland for I;
J is for Jonestown; K is for Korea;
L for massacres in Lidice; My Lai;
N, Nicaragua; O, Okinawa;
P is for the Persian Gulf and Qatar, Q;
Rwanda; Sarajevo- this year's hell;
T is Treblinka and Uganda U;
Vietnam and Wounded Knee. What's left to spell?
An X to name the countless disappeared
when they are dust in Yemen or Zaire.
Posit our little stays against the mad
possibilities of being human:
against Hiroshima, let's play Handel's
Messiah, turned up loud, so that the blast
of trumpets drowns out bombing in Vietnam.
Or let's recite a poem by Yeats, *alto voce*,
until we do not hear the cries at Auschwitz
or Dachau, pit Hitler against Whitman,
a dozen Rembrandts against Genghis Khan.
Who wins? — But these are evil balances,
for any comparison mitigates
brutalities we must leave absolute
so we never, no never, no matter the Homers,
never forgive them, never, never, never.

Or should we forgive them? Auschwitz? Berlin?
For they're dramas genetic to our hearts
and to protest we never played the part
leaves us open to history's rerun
starring us as victim or villain
Look closely at the evil of the race
in every case it wears a human face,
sometimes our own in inspired proportions.
But should we claim more than biology
for our species? Humans must be humane --
or what? What shall we do with those insane
Nazi brutes who downgrade humanity?

Gas them and declare that to be human
is not to have too much to be forgiven?

Discussion Questions:

- What kind of events does Alvarez's "primer" detail?
- Alvarez published this poem in 1984 in response to the beginning of current conflict in Yugoslavia. If she were to rewrite the list today, what tragedies could be added? The tragedies Alvarez lists fall into what span of time? If she dealt with a larger period of time what other atrocities could be listed? Will a new primer begin for a new century? How could this cycle be broken?
- What is the significance of the comparisons Alvarez makes in the poem? What is "the mad" that Alvarez refers to? What are Alvarez's "little stays"?
- Can art really neutralize the trauma of war? What is Alvarez's opinion? Do you agree?
- How does the poem end? What mood does Alvarez leave with the reader? Describe Alvarez's frustration. Is it a common response to tragedies? Compare Alvarez's response to individual, collective and official reaction to September 11.

"Or should we forgive them? Auschwitz? Berlin?"

- Why does Alvarez challenge that perhaps human travesties should be forgiven?
- "To protest that we never played a part leaves us open to history's rerun/ starring us as victim or villain" What is the meaning of these lines? Reflect on the history of the United States. When have we been the "victim," and when have we been the "villain"?
- What is Alvarez's view of humankind? Speculate what her response would be to the attack on September 11th and the events that followed.